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ABSTRACT

Using Barry Kroll's distinction of the three perspectives of audience dominant in the field of composition, this paper presents methods for teaching audience awareness in freshman composition. The theories underlying the rhetorical, informational, and social perspectives of audience are discussed; and the methods typical of each perspective are dealt with, referring readers to specific pedagogies, heuristics, and methods for teaching audience awareness to freshmen. The social perspective is emphasized as the most valuable and important perspective and the methods for teaching this perspective are offered in detail. To support the social perspective, guidelines for conducting successful peer evaluation workshops and giving assignments involving dialog writing are offered. (SRT)

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Audience Awareness: Methods and Madness

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Abstract

This article uses Barry Kroll's distinctions of the three "perspectives" of audience dominant in the field of composition to take a look at the pedagogies for teaching audience awareness available to the composition instructor. The theories underlying the rhetorical, informational, and social perspectives of audience are discussed briefly, and the methods typical of each perspective are dealt with, referring readers to specific pedagogies, heuristics, and methods for teaching audience awareness to freshmen.

The author plays down the value and importance of the rhetorical and informational perspectives for students writing within the context of freshman comp courses, and attempts to make a case for the social perspective of audience and the methods that encourage this perspective -- a perspective of writing as a fundamentally social, transactional activity, and the methods that most directly invite and encourage students to take this perspective.

Audience Addressed. Audience Invoked. Writer-Based Prose. Cognitive egocentrism. The Meanings of Audience. The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction. These titles and terms are familiar enough to all of us, representing just a fragment of current theory and research in audience awareness. Any glimpse into the past few years' College Composition and Communication or Research in the Teaching of English shows us that the problem of audience in written discourse is among the central concerns of our field. As writing teachers, we are fortunate to have a developing body of theory and research always within our reach. We know more, we understand more about this complex problem of audience than we ever have before. Yet I often wonder how many of us find ourselves walking into the classroom armed with this body of knowledge, as I so often have, only to discover that we're somehow unable to translate this knowledge into classroom techniques that work, that make a difference in our students' writing. Our students often find our talk about audience awareness just so much abstract nonsense, and most of the composition texts we provide them with, even despite the best efforts of many of these texts'authors, don't get far enough beyond a command to Know Your Audience and advise for students to obtain largely demographic knowledge about that audience. That's pretty unfortunate, too, because that demographic knowledge is of very limited value for freshmen writing in freshman composition.

When I first became interested (I could even say obsessed) with this whole problem of audience awareness, I thought that I had somehow discovered the savior of my students' prose -- I

expected that their essays would somehow be born again into a new life free of cognitive egocentrism. ("Ah, yes," you might say to yourself, "that sounds familiar.") I read voraciously of every text I could find that dealt in any way with audience, and I plotted and planned, I dreamed and schemed of ways to spread the "good news" of audience awareness amongst my students.

I first tried the direct approach, preaching the gospel of audience theory and research, casting the pearls of Donald Rubin and Walter Ong and Douglas Park before the freshman herd. Why, I even read to my students from the letters of Aristotle to the Rhetoricians. When I did so, though, I discovered just what little honor the prophet finds in his own land. My students refused to be swayed from their heathen ways. I preached the gospel to a congregation of cynics, my words bobbing and tossing about on waves of confusion, apathy.

Next I tried a more indirect approach and emulated a priest I once knew who answered every question posed to him with another question. By asking my students leading and profound questions during discussions and in my written evaluations of their essays, I succeeded mostly in creating an impressive inventory of leading and profound questions. Of course, there was nothing wrong with the questions themselves, or with asking them, for that matter. But as I thought back to that priest I once knew, I realized that he never asked us students questions that we didn't either have the background to be able to answer for ourselves, or the resources available to us from which we could discover the answers. As I've already confessed, I wasn't too successful at

giving my students the background they needed to handle the questions I wanted to pose them, and there isn't an audience-awareness bible they can turn to when searching for the meaning underlying my profound and leading questions.

As a last resort I tried a sort of witnessing-by-example approach: using those wonderful, professional essays that populate the readers featured so prominently on our syllabi and in our comp courses, I would play the part of the writer and point out to my students those points in the text most susceptible to close analysis of the writer's accommodations to or creation of audience. "Good writers do this stuff all the time," I'd tell them, which, of course, many of them took to mean they'd never do that stuff even part of the time. After a semester or two of this I became aware of the irony of holding, say, Orwell up to eighteen-year-olds as a model to be imitated. (Imagine my horror when I discovered that they wouldn't want to write like Orwell even if they could.)

So my career as preacher of the good news of audience awareness had reached a point of impasse, and I had reached a point of soul-searching, teeth-grinding, gut-wrenching doubt about my calling, about my right to even refer to myself as an apostle of the various prophets of audience awareness. And there are no organized audience-awareness orders, monasteries, or retreat houses where I could turn for guidance and counselling. There is no single bible that contains the amassed wisdom of the audience-awareness prophets where I could turn for nurturing, knowledge, and renewed strength. There isn't even a patron saint

to whom I could pray or light a candle asking for intercession before the big daddy or big mama of audience awareness, whoever he or she may be. I felt utterly lost.

And then there was. . . Peter Elbow. And there, lurking within the pages of Writing With Power, (and an integral part of the process approach to writing laid out there,) I found an entire section on audience, including chapters on "Audience as Focusing Force" (191), "Three Tricky Relationships to an Audience" (199), and even "Writing for Teachers" (216). I found an entire section on feedback, including catalogues of reader- and criterion-based questions well suited to give direction to peer response (and all of this as part of the text -- not in the least apocryphal.) This book helped my students gain new perspectives and establish new understandings of audience. It helped bring more focus and proper direction to their responses to each other's writing and to their group work. And it gave me some solid, really clear ways to approach this very difficult idea of audience awareness with them.

We all know Elbow's work pretty well by now, and his text remains one of the most accessable for students and probably the most thorough treatment of audience awareness in any text available to us. But no one, least of all Peter Elbow himself, would claim it to be the bible of audience awareness I may have once been longing for. (There are times, I'll admit, when things are going particularly well in a classroom, when the students are really getting into some great discussions of each other's essays based on their responses to the catalogue of reader-based

questions in the text, when I've been tempted to lead a solemn procession through the hallways with Writing With Power elevated before me. Such is sometimes the result of the drier years.) Elbow does give us some wonderful ways of dealing with audience that are particularly effective with freshman writers; as we all know, though, in composition there is no one way.

So I was faced with finding yet more ways to deal with audience in the freshman composition classroom -- with finding yet more ways of translating what we've learned from research and theory into pedagogy. And when I started mucking around out there in that vast swampland of research, I found that there isn't a whole lot of pedagogy developed specifically for the teaching of audience awareness. Such pedagogy does exist, yes. There's just not whole bunches of it out there for the taking.

I'll not discuss at any length here current research and theory in audience awareness; I'll instead merely refer you to some of the more recent work that covers the field well. Particularly helpful overviews are Lisa Ede's "Audience: An Introduction to Research," Ede and Andrea Lunsford's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," Russell Long's "Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?", and Douglas Park's "The Meanings of Audience." These articles cover the spectrum of audience awareness from Aristotle to the present; they take useful looks at the research that is informing our approaches to audience, and they discuss implications for pedagogy as well as specific methods.

Also valuable is Barry Kroll's "Writing for Readers: Three Perspectives on Audience," which provides us with an overview of the perspectives on audience dominant in our field. First, there is the Rhetorical Perspective, where writers "must analyze the audience's beliefs, traits, and attitudes, so that their messages can be adapted to the particular characteristics of specific audiences" (173). (A little light goes on in our heads and a little voice inside us says, "Oh, yeah -- demographics and all the other such stuff that takes up so much of the little space most texts give to audience.") Second, there is the Informational Perspective, where "the act of writing can be viewed as a process of conveying information, a process in which the writer's goal is to transmit, as effectively as possible, a message to the reader" (176). (There goes that light again, and that little voice: "Oh, yeah -- like all the modes-oriented instruction that goes on around this place.") And there is, finally, the Social Perspective, where

> writing for readers is . . . a fundamentally social activity, entailing processes of inferring the thoughts and feelings of the other persons involved in an act of communication. One of these key processes is "decentering," the ability to escape from a focus on one's own perspective, especially to avoid the "egocentric" tendency to impute this perspective to others. (179)

(And if a light clicks on at all here, chances are that it is a dim one, an appliance bulb or the like. Many of our little voices

haven't got enough experience really working with the social perspective to say anything cogent to us about it. I know that not so long ago, my little voice could only come up with, "Huh?") As Kroll explains, "'audience' has multiple meanings in contemporary work on composition . . . and various pedagogical techniques -- all purportedly aimed at teaching students about audience -- are based on [one of these three] theoretical perspectives" (172). So by using Kroll's definitions, we can not only consider the scope of audience theory, we also have a useful way of classifying and looking at audience awareness pedagogy.

As Kroll points out, "the rhetorical perspective continues to be the dominant view of audience in our field" (175), a fact which you can easily confirm by spending an afternoon walking through the forest of current composition handbooks, rhetorics, and texts of all sorts. Aristotle might be tickled by the attention we still pay to the audience's race, religion, economic status, political affiliations, and so on and so forth, and would, I'd imagine, be plumb surprised not only to find our society so much more open and vast than his own had been, but that our epistemology has changed so drastically. Demographic concerns mark the only approach to audience in many texts and are the starting point in many of the others that do go on to consider audience in other ways.

The common denominator of the rhetorical perspective is that it often views the audience as a "'target receiver' toward which writers aim their persuasive darts," which, as Kroll goes on to say, is "an oversimplified account of the audience. Readers

are not passive targets; they use their previous knowledge and active processing strategies to construct the meaning of a text" (175).

Most of our texts also brush audience off rather casually, making audience analysis seem just about the simplest thing on this little old earth to do: consider -- ". . .within any one context -- the laboratory, the business or government office, the sociology course, and so on -- audiences and purposes for writing tend to be well defined and predictable" (Cruz, 6). Oh? Not for our freshmen, they're not, and this is true whether they're writing solely to us or to their classmates. A trip through just about any stack of comparison/contrast essays tells each of us that, and should be telling us that our fondness for this rhetorical perspective (and for comparison/contrast and the other modes of discourse -- but such is stuff best saved for another time) isn't doing enough to help make our students audience aware.

Now there are times, sure, when the rhetorical perspective is necessary -- when demographics are fundamentally important to the author's purpose. My Business-Writing students need to concern themselves with this sort of information often as they prepare formal reports, proposals, sales presentations and the like. Such assignments call upon them to fictionalize themselves as active members of a community of salespersons or accountants or marketing managers or whatever -- as someone who they'll be called upon to <u>be</u>. Other classes within their majors have prepared most of them to play these roles and have given them

some experience as members of the type of audience for whom they're writing. They've had the opportunities to gain these experiences before attempting to analyze their audience.

Can students in Freshman Composition be called upon to play roles in quite the same way? Have they been given ample opportunity to experience themselves as writers of and as an audience for expository prose? Not usually. Yet we often ask them to envision themselves and audiences in just these ways. And this is one reason why our students end up engaging in what Long calls a "sort of noxious stereotyping" we wouldn't tolerate in any other context (223). Consider, for a moment, some of the questions which begin Pfister and Petrick's "A Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience." Now, this heuristic is a very fine and useful tool, other portions of which I'll look at later in this discussion. And though its starting point is the demographic concerns typical of the rhetorical perspective, you should bear in mind that this heuristic is designed for classroom use and the questions in it would be posed by and answered by the students amongst themselves. They are, however, a good example of the sorts of concerns I've been discussing:

> What is his/her [the intended audience's] physical, social, and economic status? (age, environment, health, ethnic ties, class, income)
>
> What is his/her educational and cultural experience? especially with certain patterns of written discourse?

> What are his/her ethical concerns and hierarchy of values? (home, family, job success, religion, money, car, social acceptance)
>
> What are his/her common myths and prejudices? (214)

Okay. So let's say we get our students to write a persuasive essay about some sensitive racial issue and that their intended audience is the readers of a Philadelphia newspaper, or of a newspaper in any other area that has recently experienced some form of racial trouble. How many students will create a realistic picture of audience if they approach that audience through such rhetorical concerns as those listed above? The fact is that most of our students aren't and never will be representative of the audience we'd be asking them to write for, not unless we're teaching in Philadelphia and have students from these neighborhoods -- then they'd maybe be able to approach such demographic questions knowledgeably.

Just think, too, about some of the frightening experiences you or some colleagues of yours may have had -- some of the horror stories you've heard or can tell about peer editing, about students' wailings and lamentations about the bad advice, the misdirection, the misunderstandings caused by their peers' advice. Perhaps such problems aren't really so much a matter of our students giving each other the wrong advice as they are a matter of our supplying them with the wrong questions, the wrong avenues of inquiry.

Again, though, to be fair to the heuristic, students writing

for their peers and using this heuristic in the classroom can fully explore demographic concerns. In fact, by addressing such concerns directly in class, especially within the larger context of audience awareness which the heuristic provides, our students can discover just how little practical value this sort of knowledge has when it comes to the planning or execution of their topic for their intended audience.

Even should we choose to deal directly and honestly with the fact that the only audience our students really give a hoot about, no matter for whom we're encouraging them to write, is us, we'll arrive at the rhetorical perspective quite naturally and can move beyond it quite as naturally. Jeff Schiff has outlined a syllabus that has audience analysis as its central, semester-long concern, and he meets this problem of the real audience our students write for by simply letting them write for him -- they spend their semester analyzing this one audience, relevant to each writing task. An initial assignment asks students to make up a list of thirty questions they would ask of him, and he answers all the questions, many of which, quite naturally, are demographic in nature. By discussing such questions in class, we have a way of showing our students what is or isn't important to know about their audience relative to the specific rhetorical situations they find themselves in throughout Freshman Composition. And since the questions they come up with quite often will go beyond the boundaries of the rhetorical perspective into other types of audience analysis, we also have a quite natural way of opening up discussion of audience theory,

discussion which is very important to Schiff's approach. As he says, "It has been my experience that a bit of theoretical background assuages my students' fears and lets them know that I am not some radical talkshow host hipdeep [sic] in experimental pedagogy let loose on some unsuspecting freshman class" (21).

So we don't really want to get together today and take a vow to abstain from dealing with the rhetorical perspective; we can't do away with it entirely -- we simply have to deal with it as directly as possible and invite our students to move on to other ways of analyzing audience.

The next perspective that Kroll mentions, the informational perspective, is "viewed as a process of conveying information" to a reader (176). This is also a long-time favorite of composition texts, syllabi, and instruction. On occasion, we see it become a very explicit part of the advice we give for audience analysis: "Consider your audience a mixed group of intelligent and reasonable adults. You want them to think of you as well informed and well educated. You wish to explain [emphasis mine] what you know and what you believe" (Baker, 6). Mostly, though, our emphasis on the informational perspective hides beneath our approach and fidelity to the rhetorical modes and our instruction "on general writing techniques -- use of dovetailing, proleptic devices, thematic tags, parallel forms, and so forth -- which can reduce a reader's uncertainty and thus aid comprehension" (Kroll, 177). Many of us work with syllabi that map composing neatly out into lovely little parcels of description and narration, of explanation, of cause and effect, of comparison and contrast, and

that devote a week or two to instruction on "general writing techniques," instruction done too often in a vacuum, disembodied from any real topic or purpose or audience.

When we begin with techniques and modes rather than with the topic the students wish to write about and the audience whom they're addressing, audience becomes some entity out there who our students must somehow (sometimes at any cost) inform, instruct, or persuade. This sort of audience analysis often evokes an image of a writer sitting around trying to figure out how best to hoodwink a reader. Just as Kroll points out that one limitation of rhetorically-oriented perspectives is their tendency "to see nearly all communication as persuasive in intent, with the concomitant conception of the audience as an adversary" (174), the informational perspective often assumes an agonistic relationship between the writer and the reader. While "the writer's job is to facilitate the intake of information, designing a text so that its readers will encounter few obstacles to their understanding and will thus comprehend the text with a minimal amount of effort" (Kroll, 177), students come to view the reader as an obstacle to their compositions, some sort of great wall that stands between them and their message (or quite often, between them and their grades, at least if they have an instructor who concentrates a lot of comments on reader-based concerns). I've seen students who've nearly come to the point of duking it out during peer editing or group work sessions because the writer is so insistent that the reader has failed to get what he or she is saying or has failed to be properly persuaded to

accept the writer's point of view. (Another example of how we can give them the wrong avenue of inquiry.)

"But this informational perspective is necessary for writers in many rhetorical situations," you say, and rightly so. It is absolutely necessary, and we will have to address its concerns with just about any approach to audience awareness we choose to take. We've got to talk about modes and techniques and tone and the like eventually.

Pfister and Petrick's heuristic model puts the informational perspective in its proper place, as the last of the sets of concerns the writer addresses. This part of the model is labeled "Audience/Form," and begins with the question, "What are the best methods the writer can use to achieve cooperation/persuasion/identification with the audience?", and goes on to explore the best mode of development, the tone, the level of diction, and such (214). Again, all this comes <u>after</u> students have explored their own natural starting point -- the rhetorical perspective -- and <u>after</u> they have been directed through the social perspective that makes up the bulk of the model.

Elbow's <u>Writing With Power</u> also directs students to pay attention to informational concerns, again at what appears to be the proper point in the writing process. A tremendous amount of raw writing, freewriting, is recommended before students even <u>begin</u> to consider audience in any way, and the informational perspective is again properly subordinated to the concerns of the social perspective. (Focusing on audience at other stages in the

composing process, particularly as a freewriting activity, is an acceptable option offered to students here. The emphasis is on attending to audience when revising, which research some colleagues and I have recently completed has suggested may be the most effective way for freshman students to attend to audience [Roen, Willey].)

And so we come to this "social perspective," the key process of which is getting students to decenter and escape from their own perspectives (Kroll, 179). As Kroll says, "If we assume that egocentrism is checked and finally conquered through social experiences, then perhaps our composition students need to experience writing as a form of social interaction" (180). Here we have the richest variety of methods, potential and existing, by which to help our students become more audience aware.

Again I'll return to Pfister and Petrick's heuristic model for a look at the sorts of concerns central to the social perpective. The center two sections of the model deal quite explicitly with these concerns: "The Subject Interpreted by the Audience," and "The Relationship of the Audience and the Writer." Here the students are asked to explore their audience's knowledge, opinions, and attitudes about the topic and about the writer, as well as to consider their own rhetorical purposes and how they wish to affect their audience. When students really explore these questions, especially when, as in Elbow, they are doing this relevant to a specific writing task they're actively undertaking (rather than about to undertake, maybe, soon, when the urge strikes them, or when the deadline is imminent), they

are engaging in a decentering activity. I've found the model to be especially valuable for small-group work and for individual writers working alone, but as Pfister and Petrick show, it is also a valuable tool for classwide discussion of audience awareness and for the introduction of the theoretical backgrounds to audience which Schiff thinks so important to his own approach.

And yet again I've brought up Writing With Power, because here, perhaps more than in any other text, the social perspective is the dominant view of audience awareness. Elbow presents students with an understandable view of the writing process and with a message that writing is a uniquely transactional activity. As I mentioned, there are entire sections on audience and on feedback. Of special value is the "Catalogue of Reader-Based Questions" (255-263) that invites the reader to react to a piece of writing as an act of communication between writer and reader. I've made up several versions of this catalogue, each a little different depending upon the class I've designed it for, and I have students give each other detailed written responses to the questions before making final revisions of a given piece of writing.

Most important to helping students gain this social perspective, then, is giving them every opportunity to write to and for each other and allowing them the time and atmosphere in which to come to know one another and themselves as readers of expository prose. As Moffett was telling us eighteen years ago in Teaching the Universe of Discourse, "Classmates are a natural audience. Young people are most interested in writing for their

peers" (193). Moffett talks about an "ideal" situation, one where students are writing real discourse, the types of discourse one finds outside the classroom, a situation where much feedback is provided to students in the form of audience response: students'

> writing would be read and discussed by this audience. . . Adjustments in language, form, and content would come as the writer's response to his audience's response. Thus instruction would always be individual, relevant, and timely. These are precisely the virtues of feedback learning that account for its great success. (193)

Peer revising groups, in which students use Elbow's catalogue or Pfister and Petrick's heuristic or some such other aids, are an essential part of all this.

I've also required writers to respond, in writing, to the following simple list of questions:

1. Make a list of those things your readers most likely already know about your topic.
2. Now list those things that your readers probably don't know, but which they will need to know in order to understand your essay.
3. Briefly explain how you decided what your audience's prior knowledge or lack of prior knowledge was about your topic. Try to explain how you knew what your audience did or did not know.
4. Now take a few moments to really consider your answers to points 1, 2, and 3 above. Now that you have focused

on these concerns, how will you adapt your essay to accommodate your readers?

Students workshop the answers to these questions in their revising groups and in discussion with the class at large, then go on to evaluate one another's essays both for general quality and for how well the writers have accomplished the accomodations they decided upon as a result of their analyses. I have many variations on this list, made up for classes from Basic Writing to Business Communications, some of which also ask writers to explore their readers' feelings, opinions, prejudices, etc., as appropriate. In the research I previously mentioned, the students who used the simple list above before and during revising produced significantly higher-quality writing than students who didn't attend to the social perspective (Roen, Willey).

And yet another way to enable our students to explore the social perspective of writing is by having them write dialogues, dialogues in which they allow one voice within them to play the part of their reader, and in which they respond in their writer's voice to the reader's concerns. Elbow encourages students to write dialogues as part of his "Loop Writing Process," and tells them that "Writing a dialogue produces reasoning. . . spontaneously out of your feelings and perceptions. Get two people arguing with each other on paper [for our purposes, the writer and the reader] -- or give your opponent a voice so he can argue with you on paper [for our purpose, perhaps a reader who the writer knows will disagree] -- and you will naturally produce arguments: assertions, supporting reasons, and evidence" (68).

And Leo Rockas, in his "Dialogue on Dialogue," draws a parallel between dialogues and the stuff of essays by pointing out that "Just as the story needs to break out into the voices of the speakers, into concrete drama, at high points of tension and conflict, so the essay needs to break out into conflicting arguments, into abstract dialogue, at high points of argumentative conflict. . ." (571). The benefits to this approach for argumentative essays are obvious enough, but we can use it for nearly all the assignments our students are commonly given in Freshman Comp. And, yet again referring back to group work, I've found that my own students, once they've gotten over the initial embarrassment of sharing their dialogues with their small groups (You know the types of things I've heard -- "Oh, but I'm not a very creative writer."), have had some of their liveliest, most productive discussions over such dialogues. Writers are often surprised when their peers, members of their actual audience, affirm for them how well their needs/feelings/objections and such have been anticipated by the readers' voice in the writers' dialogues. And, of course, it's a wonderful opportunity to allow actual members of writers' audiences, rather than just <u>us</u>, you know, <u>English Teachers</u>, show writers how they've misjudged that audience's needs/feelings/objections and such.

Douglas Park points out that, "For writers writing, all things germane to audience can perhaps be described as a field of awareness that can manifest itself in different ways in different rhetorical situations" (254). This being so, among our primary concerns as instructors of composition should be helping our

students develop such a "field of awareness" and providing them ample opportunities to allow them to manifest those growing, developing fields in the ways and rhetorical situations common to our composition classrooms. We've got to deal more, more directly, and more effectively with the whole idea of audience awareness. As James Moffett points out, "If anybody is going to do anything about the teaching of writing, the first priority is going to have to be the rekindling of the sense of audience. Until that's done, nothing else is going to happen" (Squire et. al., 298).

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